

Understanding At-Risk Children

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People who have never worked with vulnerable and at-risk children often look at their bright smiles and delightful laughter and think, "These children have been through a lot, but they are no different from children in secure situations." But you know differently. You have been there when the masks are dropped. These children have been deeply hurt, some scarred for life. Yet with God's help, you are making a difference. Never doubt how much what you are doing matters.

The following characteristics show just how different many at-risk children are. The list is dark and discouraging. Many of the characteristics overlap, and none of them exist in isolation. This list will help you understand vulnerable and at-risk children, but do not allow it to discourage you. Never forget: God can touch each life and rewrite the list with characteristics of joy and hope.

Abandonment—The deep feeling of having no one to turn to for answers or help.

The child has to make his own way because those who should help are not there. Even when people are there, he will not trust them because he believes that they will probably leave too.

Loneliness—The loss of identity in a family that leaves the child with the feeling of being out of place and isolated, even when surrounded by people.

She prefers to be alone in a self-made cocoon rather than be involved with people. She often both hates and enjoys this feeling of loneliness. She hates it because her heart longs to be free to relate to others and enjoy relationships. She enjoys it because she is able to gain sympathy from people without the tie of strong relationships. At the heart of this emotion is self-protection.

Rejection—The feeling of being unwanted.

He feels that his very presence is a burden for those around him and so feels rejected. He thinks, "Why should I even exist if I am such an inconvenience to others?"

Hopelessness—Inability to dream.

The present is so unstable that she cannot even imagine what the future will hold. She has no dreams. Life becomes a puzzle of trying to fit pieces together to make sense out of things that make no sense. She exists with no sense of purpose or meaning.

Worthlessness—A strong feeling that rarely stops proclaiming, "I am of no value."

If someone seeks to value him or appreciate him, he denies what he hears and rejects that person.

Loss of identity—The feeling of not knowing who she is; tied to worthlessness.

This often happens when a child has no father or male figure who cares about her. In some cultures, children are a priority because a man's name and identity are continued in them. To die without children is to perish. When a child loses a father, she may lose the one in which her identity is found. She may believe, "If I had been worth more, he would have stayed." Another result of this loss of identity is that she cannot fully trust men who want to help her. She worries that they will betray her or disappear like her father did.

Sadness—Deep, low feelings tied to lack of hope, loneliness, and hurt.

Happiness can come for a moment, but it always gives way to the feeling of sadness. Even in the middle of a conversation, his entire demeanour can suddenly change as his heart emotions reconnect with his deep sadness. The person who is feeling sad cannot explain this, but the sadness is the fruit of pain. Sadness can also be a tool he uses to keep people around him who will bring him comfort. He accepts comfort without the commitment of relationship.

Mistrust—A belief that others are not worthy of trust, which causes difficulty with trusting what people say and do.

Because she is alone—or at least feels alone, without value, and abandoned—she has no confidence that people truly want to help. She often believes that they are trying to use her for their own benefit. She will continue in a relationship to get out of it what she can, but she is always ready to leave as soon as there is reason to suspect any kind of rejection. She is careful about whom she will allow into her heart. She freezes out anyone who tries to move beyond her comfort zones.

Hiding—A form of self-protection that results in physical and emotional retreat.

He does not want to talk about important personal issues but will freely talk about things surrounding the real issue. He is careful that he gives no access to the real issue. Authority figures are suspect and kept away because he fears experiencing the pain they might cause. Any correction means rejection, and his heart retreats from the corrector. He finds accountability very difficult to accept because true problems are never dealt with, only surface problems.

Superficiality—A form of self-protection that involves keeping relationships shallow to avoid hurt; tied to hiding.

Superficiality becomes the guard of all relationships. She can never show her true feelings because she guards and protects them. Relationships are kept at a distance for fear that her true heart will be revealed. When another person pursues the heart and love of the young person intentionally, she may completely end the relationship.

Manipulation—A relationship behaviour characterized by using a situation to convince people to give you what you want.

Emotions, sadness, and loneliness are all used for the advantage of the suffering child. His life is a drama where acting becomes the key to gain what he wants or needs.

Deceit—A form of self-protection characterized by constant lying, which ensures the heart is protected.

Truth will hurt, and pain is to be avoided at all costs. The child's memory becomes selective, and she only exposes what will provide safety in this situation.

Fear—A primary emotion that can drive all interactions; tied to survival.

Anything that has the potential of causing pain or the memory of pain is to be fearfully avoided. Fear of what could be or could happen is always on his mind. Fear pushes the heart to pursue safety at all costs. Obedience does not flow out of what is good for the child or out of love for the person asking him to obey; instead, the response is driven by fear of what could happen to him if he fails to obey.

Insecurity—A lack of stability either physically or emotionally; tied to fear.

The child feels unprotected all the time; therefore, she is unsafe. She is careful to make sure that her heart is protected. A defence mechanism is always employed. She quickly interprets what people

say and do in light of whether she feels like she is in trouble or safe. She often reads intentions into statements and actions that were not there. She easily takes offence where none was meant.

Poverty—The fear of constant scarcity that says there will never be enough, even in the midst of plenty.

The goal is to get what he needs now because he has no idea what will happen the next day. The now becomes the focus; he gives no thought to the future, so he does not have hopes or dreams for the future. His decisions are based on what he believes is best right now. Hoarding becomes a lifestyle.

Greed—The feeling that she must hoard because she does not trust that there will be enough to meet her needs; tied to poverty.

The constant need for more and more is an indication that she is never satisfied. She is always driven to get more. She does not care whether others have what they need as long as her individual needs are met. She has no consideration of others, or if she does, it lasts only long enough to get what she wants from other people, at their expense.

Anger—A secondary emotion that can hide primary ones, such as fear or loss of love or identity; can simmer below the surface and then erupt.

Anger is always present in his heart because of what he has experienced in the past. He explodes over even a small thing. It often seems like an eruption has come out of nowhere, but the anger was always there, only suppressed. He will fight at a moment's notice. He will always find someone else to blame for anything bad that happens, another trait tying into anger.

Independence—The desire to pursue one's own wants and needs without being questioned; no one can be trusted so she will do it all alone.

If someone questions her, she will show rebellion. She believes that things have to be done "my way," and anyone who gets in the way is an enemy. She rejects accountability. She lives her life according to what seems best in her own eyes.

Striving—Lack of satisfaction as a life-defining characteristic; tied to greed.

Since there is no one who cares, he has to do what it takes to make sure things will work out for his good. He will try at all costs to do anything possible to make his life better. He may even overwork. Yet often he finds no satisfaction in work. Often his identity is tied into what he is striving after. His need for success can even come with an attitude of revenge. "After I have succeeded, those who have rejected me will envy me, and then I will get back at them." His value is attached to the accumulation of what he has.

Escape—The solution when emotional pain cannot be healed; similar to hiding.

The child seeks satisfaction in things that give her temporary value or identity, such as sports, drugs, sex, and alcohol. In Western countries, entertainment, video games, pornography, and the Internet are added to the list. The false world she has created in her heart can be more real to her than the painful one that is a reality. Therefore, she seeks the false reality at all costs and at all times.

Though many of these responses may seem more sinful or more obvious due to these vulnerable children's difficult circumstances, their hearts are no different than any sinful human heart. God sent His Son to heal the hurts of all of our hearts, including those of children who have experienced pain, hurt, and loss. His grace is sufficient for every need!